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#1383

Practical Atheist
I Believe In God But I'm Not A Fanatic

In recent years Great Britain's chief export to the US seems to be books by atheist authors such as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who wrote *The God Delusion*, and literary critic Christopher Hitchens who wrote *God is Not Good*.

They not only contend that faith in God is irrational, but that faith in God damages a society. They believe that people's faith shouldn't be respected, it should be exposed as detrimental to the human race.

Other prominent British atheists seem to be having second thoughts. Well known scholar Anthony Flew came to the conclusion that "Evolutionary theory has no reasonable explanation for the origins of life."

More recently A. N. Wilson, who left the faith and declared himself an atheist has come back to faith in God. Wilson said the strongest argument of all was how the "Christian faith transforms individual lives."

Another British atheist, Matthew Parris, made the mistake of visiting Christian aid workers in Malawi. What he saw, "Confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my worldview, and has embarrassed my belief that there is no God."

Now all these guys haven't suddenly fallen to their knees and cried out, "What must I do to be saved," but they have been brought to a point where they're questioning atheism because of the life changing message of the Bible that they see played out before them.

From Saul of Tarsus who imprisoned Christians and, in his own words *compelled them to blaspheme*, to John Newton, the slave trader, to my own life, God's truth has been changing lives.

Saul became an apostle who died for his faith. Newton became a pastor who wrote the words to *Amazing Grace*, and I was given a new life and allowed by God to serve Him.

All down through history, atheists and ungodly men and women have had their lives transformed.

Unfortunately, too many times we say we believe in Jesus Christ and we tell others that we're God-followers but our lives don't match up to our words.

I. God Is On The Alert For People Who Are Totally Committed To Him

Turn to 2 Chronicles 16 Page 398

Last week we started a 4 week series we're calling Practical Atheist. We're asking the question, do I say one thing but do another? Do I say, "Of course I believe in God. I believe that He created the world. I believe that He loves me. I believe that He gave His only begotten Son Jesus to die for my sins."

Do we say all of that, and then in some areas of life conveniently ignore Him?

While atheists are taking a second look at theism because of the life changing truth of the Bible, are we as theists ignoring areas of our life where we should be obeying God?

The ultimate sin of our age seems to be hypocrisy. Our culture is forgiving for moral and ethical failures when the person who failed admits they were wrong and tries to make it right. That's a good thing.

But too many times in the church we have standards of behavior that leave no room for repentance and restoration. As one man put it we're the only army that shoots it's wounded.

What is God looking for? We don't have to guess. We aren't at the mercy of somebody's personal opinion. The Bible tells us:

The ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, And He ponders all his paths. (Proverbs 5:21)

God knows what's going on in our lives. There's nothing that we can hide. We can fool everyone else. We can even fool ourselves some times. But not God.

Now listen to this: **read 2 Chronicles 16:9 (through "Him")**

The Message paraphrases that verse *God is always on the alert, constantly on the lookout for people who are totally committed to him.*

God is looking for people who know Him and who are living for Him. God is looking for the totally committed.

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. (Psalm 34:15)

God's not interested in a bunch of hypocrites. The English word "hypocrite" comes from 2 Greek words, *hupo*, which means "under" and *krino*, which literally means "to judge" or "to discern."

The Greeks used the verb *hupokrinomai* to mean acting in a play. The sign of the theater is the 2 masks because the Greeks didn't use costumes. They used all male actors and they showed their character by using a mask.

Hupokrinomai means "to speak or discern from under" because an actor spoke from under his mask.

A hypocrite has a false face. A hypocrite hides behind a false presentation of himself. He's not who he seems to be. He's just acting.

God is on the alert for people who are totally committed to Him. He's looking for people who have no mask. He's not looking for people who want to play games.

Today in our service we've thought about our persecuted brethren in various parts of the world. If you're living under extreme persecution you don't have the luxury of being a hypocrite.

You don't have the luxury of being able to say, "Sure I believe in God but I'm not a fanatic."

I. God Is On The Alert For People Who Are Totally Committed To Him

II. A Half-hearted Expression Of Obedience By His People Makes God Nauseous

Turn to Revelation chapter 3 Page 1090

The last book of the Bible isn't "Revelations" it's the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

It was written in 90 AD by the Apostle John while he was in exile. The rest of the Apostles had been martyred, the fledgling Christian church had been hit hard by Roman persecution and so God unveiled the future for the Apostle John by giving him a series of revelations.

The good news is, God wins in the end. His kingdom is established and Jesus Christ rules the world from David's throne.

At the beginning of the Revelation John gets a message about 7 churches in Asia Minor. These seemed to be kind of examples of Christians across the board.

The last one God identifies is the Church at Laodicea. Laodicea was a rich area. It was known for manufacturing textiles and produced eye salves and powders used in ophthalmology. Just outside the city were hot springs where they captured hot water.

The Laodicean church was a wealthy church. **Read verses 17- 18**

Picking up on all the things Laodicea was famous for God says, “You may be wealthy but your spiritually poor. You need my true spiritual riches. You need my spiritual garments. You need my spiritual eyes to see.”

He’s saying, “You guys aren’t serious about me. Your half-hearted in your faith. You’re making me ill.”

Read 14-16

Did you catch that? God says, “I’m looking for people who are totally committed to me. I’m not looking for people who say, I believe in God but I’m not a fanatic.

I like really hot coffee or tea. Sometimes I’ll make myself a cup in the morning and I bring it down to my desk and start working. If I get really involved in what I’m doing sometimes that coffee sits for a while.

Did you ever do that? You’re not paying attention and you lose all track of time. The coffee’s been sitting there for a couple of hours and without thinking you just reach down, grab your cup, and take big slug... yuck! It’s not hot. It’s not cold like a Starbucks frappachino. It’s room temperature and you just want to spit it back in the cup.

That’s what God says He feels like when we’re lukewarm. It makes Him want to hurl.

There’s a Greek word for “spit”, *emptuo*, that’s used in the Bible. Here in verse 16 the word is *emeo*, which means to vomit. It’s the only time in the whole New Testament where the word is used.

Lukewarm Christians make God want to vomit.

You say, “Ed , that’s kind of gross.” It is, isn’t it? And that’s the point.

- I. God Is On The Alert For People Who Are Totally Committed To Him*
- II. A Half-hearted Expression Of Obedience By His People Makes God Nauseous*
- III. Being Totally Committed Means More Than Going Through The Motions*

Turn to Isaiah 1 Page 604

During Isaiah's time, what we know as Israel was split into 2 kingdoms. The northern part was called Israel and the southern part was called Judah. In 722 BC Israel fell to the Assyrians.

Isaiah warned Judah that they were next only they wouldn't fall to the Assyrians but to the Babylonians. Since Babylon hadn't risen to power yet the people thought Isaiah was crazy.

The truth was, just like God used the Assyrians to punish Israel for their sins he was going to use Babylon to punish Judah.

In Isaiah chapter 1 the prophet gives God's pronouncement of condemnation against Judah. To me, these are some of the scariest words in the Bible. I say that because here's God pronouncing judgment on His people who were actually going through the motions of worship which He had ordered.

Follow this: **Read 1:10**

When God starts off calling you Sodom and Gomorrah, you know you're in big trouble.

Read 11-15

Listen to this. The sacrifices, the sabbaths, the appointed festivals, these were all aspects of Jewish worship that God had meticulously spelled out in His word.

The Mosaic law was filled with detail after detail of all the specific things the Jews were supposed to do to worship God.

Here's where it gets really scary (and maybe just a bit too personal.) Judah was doing all these things. The leaders, the priests, and the people were meticulously practicing every nuance and subtlety of God's commandments.

They did it all. And did God say, "Great is your reward, oh obedient ones?"

No. Just the opposite. He said, "I've had enough. I'm full up to here with all your outward show." To put it in the words of Revelation 3:16, "You make me sick. I'm ready to vomit."

Notice God's question to them in verse 11. *To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?* "Why are you doing all these things?"

Well, cause you told us to God. Surely you can't be angry at us doing what you told us to do!

Listen to this, verse 16... **Read 16 -23**

God says, "Sure you go to church. Sure you help out with AWANA. Sure you greet people on Sunday mornings and sing on a praise team or choir."

"Sure you sit there most weeks and listen to the sermon. Sure you give a couple of bucks in the offering. Sure you preach sermons or serve as an elder. Sure you write letters to the missionaries or knit prayer shawls for those in need." *To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?*

"What the purpose if the other 6 days of the week you're going to basically live like I don't exist? What's the purpose if how you talk, how you conduct yourself in business, how you act when your out on a date isn't impacted?"

"What's the purpose if your still going to hold that grudge or nurture that hatred in your heart? What's the purpose if you're not even going to mention spiritual things around your neighbors or coworkers because it might be socially uncomfortable?"

What do we say, or at least think in return? "Sure God, that's easy for you to say living up there in heaven and all.

You don't understand what it's like to be human. You don't understand all the pressures of being a human being!"

Wrong answer!

God knows exactly what it's like to be human.

Hebrews is a fascinating New Testament book. Its purpose is to show the superiority of Jesus Christ over the angels, the prophets, Moses, and the Law of Moses. All of those

people and things had a very important place in God's program.

All of those people and things were the foundation for what was to come. As Christians we don't ignore the Old Testament because we have Jesus. In fact, we want to know and understand the Old Testament because it points us to Jesus.

Read verses 14-18

God knows exactly what it's like to be human. Back in the garden of Eden He promised a Savior when Adam sinned.

And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel. (Genesis 3:15)

That was a promise that the Savior would be a human being.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

That was a promise that the Savior would be virgin born and therefore sinless.

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

That was a promise that the sinless human being would be God in the flesh.

We as human beings are all sinners. The Savior had to be sinless so he would be free from our condemnation. He had to be human so that he could stand in our place. He had to be God so that He could make an eternal sacrifice.

That's why God knows exactly what it's like to be human. God became flesh in Jesus Christ, lived for 33 years on the planet, and then suffered the indignity of the cross for our sins.

God knows. *For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)*

That's why *God is always on the alert, constantly on the lookout for people who are totally committed to him.*

You say, “Well I believe in God, but God doesn’t want me to be a fanatic does He?”

Here’s some headlines from the past couple of weeks. You tell me, are these Christians fanatics?

- NAIROBI, Kenya, Three masked members of a militant Islamist group in Somalia last week shot and killed a Somali Christian who declined to wear a veil as prescribed by Muslim custom.
- Al Shabaab militants beheaded two young boys in Somalia because their Christian father refused to divulge information about a church leader.
- Christians in Pakistan's Punjab province feared more violence Thursday, October 15, after authorities released six suspected Muslim militants accused of anti-Christian clashes that killed nearly a dozen people, while acquitting an alleged Muslim rapist of a Christian girl.
- Two young women who converted from Islam to Christianity may face execution or life imprisonment after an Iranian court officially charged them with "apostasy" and "propagation of the Christian faith", Thursday, October 8.
- ADDIS ABABA,-- Ethiopian police was still searching for key suspects Friday, October 2, after hundreds of angry Muslims reportedly attacked evangelical churches in the western Arsi zone of Ethiopia.

Think about this, Over 100 million Christians worldwide suffer interrogation, arrest, and even death for their faith in Jesus Christ with millions more facing discrimination and alienation.

What’s the matter with those people? Why don’t they just wear veils, proclaim that there’s no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet?

Why don’t Christians in Cuba, North Korea, and China just stop meeting together and telling others about their faith?

- One report out of North Korea tells of 25 people declared to be Protestant Christian spies. The Army was building a road in the area and they were made to lie down in front of a steam roller in front of scores of witnesses.

They were given a choice, renounce their faith and pledge allegiance to Kim Jong Il or

die. They chose death by crushing. One of the soldiers later escaped North Korea and was interviewed. He said he thought, at the time, that these church people were crazy. He thought then that religion was an “opiate,” and it was stupid for them to give up their lives for religion.

There’s a lot of fanatics out there, isn’t there.

I don’t know how you respond to the reports of our brothers and sisters suffering and dieing for their faith but it makes me question my own commitment.

If I don’t want to go “overboard” with this Christian stuff.

If I keep my mouth shut about my Savior because I’m worried about what people will think of me. If I don’t want to be fanatical about the Bible and read it every day. If I don’t think that Jesus Christ is worth living for, then I sure wouldn’t be willing to die for Him, would I?

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III. Being Totally Committed Means More Than Going Through The Motions

IV. The Solution To Half-hearted Christianity Is To Radically Fall In Love With God

Francis Chan was born in 1968 in Hong Kong. His mother died while giving birth to him. His father would beat him often. When Francis was 7 his father remarried and moved the family to California. Chan’s step mother died in a car accident shortly after moving. Then when Francis Chan was a junior in high school his father died of cancer.

All of that could have made Chan a bitter man. Instead God reached into his life through a church youth group and gave him a new life.

Today Francis Chan pastors Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley. He wrote a book called *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God*.

In it Francis Chan asks this question:

“Have you ever wondered if we’re missing it?

It’s crazy, if you think about it. The God of the universe- the Creator of nitrogen and pine needles, galaxies and E-minor- loves us with a radical, unconditional, self-sacrificing love. And what is our typical response? We go to church, sing songs, and try not to cuss.”

“Whether you’ve verbalized it or not, we all know something’s wrong.”

“Does something deep inside your heart long to break free from the status quo? Are you hungry for an authentic faith that addresses the problems of our world with tangible, even radical, solutions? God is calling you to a passionate love relationship with Himself. Because the answer to religious complacency isn’t working harder at a list of do’s and don’t’s. It’s falling in love with God. And once you encounter His love you will never be the same because when you’re wildly in love with someone, it changes everything.”

See, our problem isn’t that we just haven’t done enough for God. The crux of it all is we have a deficient, inaccurate view of God. Too many times we see Him as this benevolent being who’s satisfied when we manage to fit Him into our lives in some small way.

Listen, God has never had an identity crisis. He knows exactly who He is. He’s the almighty, the omnipotent, all knowing, all powerful, majestic, holy, transcendent creator of all things.

At the same time He is the epitome of grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness.

That God, who’s highest priority is Himself and His glory, calls us to give ourselves to the greatest purpose of all. Him!

He showers us with His overwhelming love and then calls us to present ourselves to Him as a living sacrifice.

We, of all people, ought to be God’s biggest fans. You know where we get the English word “fan?” It’s just a shortened form of the word “fanatic.”

Do you know what an oxymoron is? An oxymoron has nothing to do with Oxyclean or a person who’s not very bright. An oxymoron is a figure of speech that combines two normally contradictory terms.

Some paradoxical oxymorons become cliches: Deafening silence, Sweet sorrow, Silent scream, Virtual reality, Jumbo shrimp.

Well here’s one that should just be so contradictory that it doesn’t even compute with us. *I Believe In God But I’m Not A Fanatic.*

If you and I really believe in God, if we’re captured by His majesty, if we’re

overwhelmed by His grace then to say we're fanatics ought to be putting it mildly.

Last week I invited you to join me in making a covenant with God. A covenant that says, "God, I admit my tendencies to pick and choose when it comes to how I live. God I have my excuses. But I'm asking you today to do what David asked in Psalm 139.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23-24

Many people, last week, said "Ed I'm joining you in that covenant."

This week I'd like to follow that up with a challenge to prayer. We'll never be people who break out of the practical atheist mode by just trying a little harder. By just doing a little more for God. This is an inside out thing.

This morning I'd ask you to join me in making a prayer commitment.

Every head bowed. Every eye closed.

I wonder how many of you this morning would be willing to commit with me to pray this prayer from the heart. "God I'm hungry for an authentic faith. God I'm ready to break free from the status quo."

How many of you would say "This week I'm going to bathe my life in prayer. I'm going to cry out to God to strip away all the pretense and my ready made excuses. I'm going to spend time with God each day this week asking, God show me your limitless glory and your fathomless love in a fresh way. God, I don't want to be a practice atheist. I want to be a practicing Christian."